

Editorial

The Meaning of the Mandate

One of the more arresting features of Richard Nixon's greatest triumph is that it occurred ten years to the day after his worst defeat. It was on November 7, 1962, in the wake of his losing bid for the governorship of California, that he stalked down to a press conference and bitterly told reporters that they would no longer be able to kick him around because he was quitting politics. His climb back from the depths rivals the comebacks of Churchill and de Gaulle, and now he is at the pinnacle of his career, the engineer of one of the most lopsided victories in American political history.

It was not, however, an unmitigated personal success. The turnout was one of the lowest in decades, with less than 55 per cent of the nation's 136 million eligible voters casting ballots. When more than 62 million people sit out an election, a certain lack of ardor is indicated. Moreover, it may well be that the great outpouring of votes for Nixon was less a vote of confidence in the man and his policies than a vote of nonconfidence in his opponent, less a recognition of his superb leadership than a vote for things as they are and for Nixon as custodian of the status quo.

The best thing that Nixon had going for him was George McGovern's economic program, which alienated millions of Americans who see themselves on the threshold of affluence and don't want their slice of the pie reduced in size before they've even had a chance to taste it. (A Bronx cheer is in order here for the uncompromising practitioners of the New Politics, who helped elect Nixon in the first place in 1968 by blackjacking Hubert Humphrey and who helped reelect him in 1972 by demanding swifter and more radical change than most Americans were ready to absorb.)

What does Nixon's mandate mean in terms of his day-to-day functioning? In one sense, relatively little. Had he won by one vote instead of seventeen million or so, he still would have been

cloaked with all the immense powers of the presidency. John F. Kennedy did not consider himself one whit less a President because he was elected by a margin of less than one per cent; nor did Nixon, for that matter, in similar circumstances in 1968. Both moved boldly in certain areas, but both suffered from a lack of what political scientist Richard Neustadt calls "leeway." Without the leeway that grows out of a broad base of popular support, says Neustadt, a President "may not be left helpless, but his options are reduced, his opportunities diminished, his freedom for maneuver checked in the degree that Washington conceives him unimpressive to the public."

Well, the American public has given Richard Nixon leeway to spare, and now it remains to be seen what he will do with it. Will he, as the more apocalyptic New Leftists solemnly warn, finally show his true colors by scrapping the First Amendment, clapping newsmen and assorted dissenters into concentration camps, and rescinding his promise to end the war in Vietnam? Or will he, as his admirers maintain, move in surprising directions to ensure himself a favorable place in the history books now that he is no longer haunted by the need to run for reelection (and by the need to convince himself that he is loved, after all)? Both attitudes assume that the real Richard Nixon will now stand up; both betray totally contrasting notions of who the real Richard Nixon is. That is not surprising. In spite of the fact that he has spent more than a quarter of a century in public life (or, perhaps, because of it, since politics prompts most men to fashion impenetrable masks for their protection and convenience), nobody seems to know the real Richard Nixon. If there is one.

Nonetheless, it can safely be said that a number of constraints will be operating to prevent Nixon from doing his worst—or best. As F.D.R. once put it: "I am the captain of the ship, but I never forget that it is the seas which control the captain; that events and public opinion are the limitations on my power and the implements of it."

Beyond unpredictable circumstances and shifting public support, there is Congress to consider, and Nixon once again will have to contend with a Democratic House and Senate. Then, too, there is growing distrust, if not

outright fear, of the very institution of the presidency. Largely because of the undeclared war in Vietnam, notes Sir Denis Brogan, the British historian, "the presidency now is seen not as the great saving, unifying institution which it has been in the past but as a dangerous institution which has got to be cut down to size."

Of critical importance too is the President's own attitude toward his office. Nixon's first term was a curious mixture of activism in foreign affairs and passivity in domestic affairs. The next four years are likely to bring up the mixture as before, for Nixon commented recently: "In the field of foreign policy, a President can act, and he should act, and he should lead and, generally speaking, he can carry the country with him. But in the field of domestic policy, it is a very, very different matter. Here a President can propose, and then Congress does what it pleases."

Accordingly, in foreign affairs he is likely to press for a consolidation of the understandings with Moscow and Peking, and we might even see the beginnings of an opening toward Cuba. The negotiations on Vietnam will probably be affected by what Nixon is certain to interpret as an endorsement of his "peace-with-honor" stance, and as a result a cease-fire might be delayed. Domestically, we can expect a marked degree of restraint in Nixon's promotion of social programs, particularly in view of his determination to limit federal spending to \$250 billion a year. The Watergate burglary/bugging and assorted other scandals will be swept under a very capacious carpet. Unless Nixon and the working press declare a truce, which would be out of character for both, the next four years are not likely to be any more open than were the first four, and the First Amendment is likely to continue to be treated as an inconvenience.

In his telegram conceding the election to his rival, George McGovern expressed the wish that Richard Nixon "will lead us to a time of peace abroad and justice at home." In his victory speech Nixon spoke several times of his desire for a "generation of peace" and said, "This is a great goal!" He said nothing, however, about justice at home, and that is an equally great goal. Let us hope that it is not overlooked.

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